

National Security Language Initiative for Youth (NSLI-Y) – Answers for Students and Parents

Narrator:

The National Security Language Initiative for Youth is part of an effort by the U.S. government to improve Americans' knowledge and understanding of foreign languages and culture through language learning. Launched in 2006, NSLI-Y, as the program is known, gives young Americans a unique opportunity to learn languages overseas, where they are spoken and used regularly and to experience other parts of the world firsthand.

Recently we talked with two of the top managers of the NSLI-Y program. From the U.S. State Department, Lisa Wishman, Program Officer in the Youth Programs Division. And Lisa Choate, Vice President for American Councils for International Education. Today, they answer some of the most important questions from potential NSLI-Y participants and their parents, such as how the application and scholarship process works, how health and safety concerns are managed, and what support is available for NSLI-Y students overseas.

Narrator:

The NSLI-Y program came from a presidential initiative launched in 2006 to accelerate American's knowledge of languages that are not commonly taught in American schools.

Lisa Wishman:

Interest in foreign language learning and in languages that are less commonly taught is historic. And that's important, because the reason these kids are over there is because the U.S. government has funded them to be there.

Narrator:

Lisa Wishman is the NSLI-Y Program Officer for the U.S. State Department's Youth Programs Division. NSLI-Y was created in part to expand access to language-learning opportunities to all parts of the United States, and ensure all students can take advantage of the opportunity.

Lisa Wishman:

This is among the latest effort to facilitate Americans' across the country, in the far corners of the country, ability to access languages that are less commonly taught. You know, it's one thing if you're in a major metropolitan area. It's another thing if you're in some far corner of Kansas or Iowa. Because we understand that most of our kids hear about the programs from their teachers. But if you're not in a school or a school district where your teacher has the access to the technology to have stumbled upon the program or to have received an email about the program or to have attended a meeting where a brochure might be available on the program, you the student may never have actually heard, but those are the people we're trying to figure out how to reach. We're really looking for people who think that language is the best thing since sliced bread.

Narrator:

Students are required to submit an application to participate in the NSLI-Y program. Many people might be surprised to learn that previous language experience is not a big requirement for the program. NSLI-Y seeks to offer the overseas experience to a wide range of students.

Lisa Choate:

Well, you know, we take a lot of beginners; a lot of kids who haven't started any of these languages just because, honestly, not that many American schools offer these languages to begin with so a lot of the kids are beginners.

Narrator:

Lisa Choate is Vice President of American Councils for International Education, one of the implementing organizations for the State Department's NSLI-Y program. Students are selected for the NSLI-Y program based on many factors, not just academic performance.

Lisa Choate:

We choose some of them simply because we think they'll do well overseas. We don't have any way of knowing that they're going to learn a language well necessarily if they haven't ever had one before. We had seven girls in Tajikistan last summer and talk about taking a trip outside the box. You know, Tajikistan is definitely a country that is so much less developed than the United States. We don't see kids that have real good preparation for a country like Tajikistan simply because there's no way an American kid can be prepared for a country like that. And you send these girls over and you just think – let's see what they're going to do; let's see what they're going to make of it. And they come back and a couple of

them, several of them are taking Persian now in university because they went there and they thought it was really interesting.

Narrator:

NSLI-Y awards full merit-based scholarships to high school students for participation in summer, semester, and academic-year language programs in countries where the seven NSLI-Y languages are spoken. Along with the openness of the application process, the availability of scholarships is another important part of expanding students' opportunities.

Lisa Wishman:

The scholarship is supposed to serve and hopefully does serve as an incentive. It puts something on the radar screen that maybe nobody thought about before. We would like to think that it also reaches out and makes possible to those whose socioeconomic means might be more limited to participate in the program.

Lisa Choate:

That's one of the great things about this program actually is that it doesn't matter if you're family has means or not and we see a lot of kids going on the program who wouldn't be able to do this otherwise. And that to me is really important because just because your family doesn't have money doesn't mean that you shouldn't go on the program and this program has been equally available to everybody and I've seen lots of kids that I know really benefitted, really enjoyed the program and I feel like this has put them in a different place. We could see in their applications when we read them that they were promising kids. When we took them on the program we could see they really benefitted and I think for just the general benefit of the country, these sorts of scholarships are really important.

Narrator:

Deciding to spend a summer, semester or academic year in a foreign country away from family and friends should not be taken lightly. It's normal for students to feel nervous and a little overwhelmed. But it's also important for students to remember that they're not alone.

Lisa Choate:

They're in groups of kids that are very much like them. And maybe they were one of the best kids in their high school and maybe they did have friends who weren't interested in foreign affairs or languages or politics or anything and then they get to the orientation and they look around and they realize that every other kid in that room is just like them. And it may be the first time they've really been around a group of peers in that fashion. You know, generally they are really motivated students and motivated people; really interesting people to be around. And to watch them grow. That's the great thing about what we get to do at work is put in some of the ingredients and watch these kids make it into whatever they do. Which is often something totally amazing. It's great. We're very lucky.

Narrator:

Parents play a large role in the NSLI-Y community. It's understandable for any parent to have a level of concern for the safety and health of their child while they're overseas. The U.S. State Department, in cooperation with implementing partners such as American Councils, gives health and safety issues priority attention.

Lisa Wishman:

It really starts at the point of application. The students are required to fill out a medical form. Their physician has to sign off on it. There's another component where it does ask about specialized medical issues and that might be anything from a physical problem to a mental health issue. None of this is used to disqualify a student. I mean, obviously, we can't do that. When you're addressing safety and welfare issues, knowing it early on helps us make wiser placements.

Lisa Choate:

We think a lot about safety and security and supervision. Because ultimately a bad experience – it ruins the whole thing. In terms of planning, we all have worked with our partners for a long time. They're people we know overseas. If they're more recent partners, we've gone through a process with them of making sure they know what we expect. And we expect a lot. We expect that they're talking to host families, explaining what the rules are. They're talking to other people at their institutions. We're expecting that they're visiting host families. Everything is very closely supervised. A lot of programs send staff with the students, so that there's someone there every day that they're talking to or someone that's available for them and in addition to that we make sure that the students have information so that they can contact us or their program organization so that they're lots of ways. Sometimes, students get someplace and maybe they don't feel comfortable with their local coordinator. So we make sure that the students have somebody else that they can go to at all times. There's always a lot of options.

Narrator:

On top of the direct support provided by implementing partners locally and in the U.S., the safety, security, and health of students is fully supported by the U.S. Embassy in the country.

Lisa Wishman:

Two more pieces of reassurance. Number one is of course that the kids all go overseas being covered by ASPE which is a health benefits program. They do have coverage. The other thing is that embassies have regional medical officers. Among the things that they are tasked with is sort of having an overall knowledge of the medical facilities, laboratories, the whole business, hospitals, clinics in their geographic area. A lot of that information is available to the public on embassy websites, but also certainly through our channels. If they went through the public affairs section and they needed some guidance on that. The regional medical officer or a staff in that office would facilitate that.

Narrator:

Beyond issues such as health and security, the NSLI-Y program is prepared to deal with some of the general welfare issues that confront students overseas. Managing the range of adjustment issues is also part of the NSLI-Y program. Involvement of the parents in this area is welcomed.

Lisa Choate:

It's surprising kids do sometimes just say – look, I don't think I want to do this. And usually we go through a counseling process at that point. We talk them through it, we say what do you not like, can we fix it, is there a way that you can be comfortable. We always have a couple of kids who come home early, but really it's, I would say tremendously small, but I would say the vast majority come back with something very valuable. We in the U.S. also give them lots of support, we give them ideas, we call the kids if we need to. We talk to the parents, sometimes the parents help. You can support them however you do that. So we like asking parents to help us when there's a problem. Because particularly for kids on the longer program, they're inevitably going to go through some times that are not so good. There are going to be some rough moments you've got to live through, and that's something the staff overseas really help with.

Narrator:

Many parents share their own experiences with NSLI-Y about their involvement with the program. Their letters often express their satisfaction that health, safety, and the welfare of the students is taken very seriously.

Lisa Wishman:

Among the lines in this letter: "As a parent, you can only imagine how much I worried about my son's well-being and safety in a country half-way around the world." And then it says "However, the two program directors always ensured that parents were informed of what was going on before, during, and after the program. Their coordination of the program was superior to say the least."

Lisa Choate:

There a lot of people overseas who maybe themselves spent time in the United States but they never saw Americans come to their countries and so this is so exciting for them to finally see that they can welcome Americans in their community.

Narrator:

The NSLI-Y program is managed by a community of professionals both in the U.S. and at the overseas locations. The families, teachers, and local coordinators are all closely involved in making the students' experiences a positive one.

Lisa Choate:

In the former Soviet Union we've involved a lot of our students who were on exchange programs in the U.S. in putting together the NSLI-Y program. And those are some of the most, some of the best coordinators we have because they can both share pieces of America with our students, and they've also spent a lot of time thinking about what they wanted Americans to know about their country. So they are these incredibly engaged, motivated supporters of the program so it's actually a huge community of people that make it come together.

Lisa Wishman:

We deal directly with American Councils as the recipient of this cooperative agreement. There are certain things, though, both as a parent of a 15 ½ year old who is interested in applying to my program and as a State Department employee and foreign service officer, there are certain support mechanisms that we are carefully putting into place and coordinating with American Councils and all the overseas partners and that starts not only with giving the cooperative agreement to organizations in whom we have a great deal of faith, we have online registration with the embassies so that the American citizens services at the consular section knows that our kids are on the ground.

Narrator:

Host families are perhaps the most important part of the NSLI-Y community. Families are selected based on a thorough application process and are screened by NSLI-Y partners before being accepted.

Lisa Choate:

What happens in most of the countries we work in is that our local coordinators go out to their network of friends and they use their institutions to come up with a group of people that they think would be good hosts for the student and then they go through an application procedure and then they go and visit the family in the home to make sure there's space for the student. Some of them may be volunteers in the community who were on similar types of programs in the U.S. and so they have some idea of what it's like and what's expected. In other cases, they may be teachers at a school, a school principal, it may be a university professor, or it may be someone who is an exchange professional. There are lots of different kinds of people who work on the program.

Narrator:

Living with a family is a key part of the immersion experience for the students. It not only provides a natural environment in which to learn and use everyday language. Host families can help explain differences in the culture that students may find strange or uncomfortable. And, host families look out for the students' safety and well-being while living in the foreign community.

Lisa Choate:

The one thing that I saw consistently across all the reporting was that the students talked about how great the families were. And, yes, they enjoyed their language program and they learned a lot, but really those everyday contacts were just tremendously important. Many of the kids said that the host family was the best part. One kid in particular, he said, you know, I had an OK relationship with my family and everything, everything was fine, but oh, the grandmother. He said this grandmother and I, we really just,

really liked each other. And it's just, I think of how many people would go overseas thinking that their best friend overseas would be a grandmother, you know, but it's a warm thing.

Narrator:

The immersion experience for language learners is culturally-bound. Students on the program find that although they take formal language courses, much of the learning takes place outside the classroom. Living with a host family expands the cultural context in which language learning takes place and provides a window into the lives, perspectives and practices of the host country's citizens.

Lisa Wishman:

That's among the reasons why this program is so important because, yes, you can learn Chinese in the United States, you can learn Arabic, you can learn Russian. But what you don't get is the textured experience of learning it overseas. It's a very open structured program, and so that's what we're trying to identify in the selection process is someone who's going to have enough self-motivation to get over some of those bumps in the road and to keep up their linguistic stamina and emotional energy to get through kind of the long haul. And anecdotally, we're also hearing interestingly enough that not infrequently, the kids that come into the program with formal language learning tend to be a little resistant to understanding how much language learning they can have in an informal environment with the tools to help them understand that going to the market, sitting with your host family and watching television, doing a community service, short-term project can also be a learning experience.

Narrator:

The NSLI-Y program also provides students with opportunities to participate in volunteer projects. This is another way of expanding the informal context of language learning.

Lisa Choate:

Well, you know, it's a part of American culture and it's not a part of the culture in most of the places we are overseas. What we did a lot of this summer in Russia, we visited orphanages. And we're doing that this semester, too. And our students will go to orphanages to help out, maybe teach English. We had some students who painted a school over the summer and it's really great because for our kids, even those who don't have very much language, this kid in the orphanage so wants to communicate with you; suddenly you become an amazing person to them, sort of a superhero. And it's great thing, because suddenly you have lots of motivation to speak the language. They don't care about your grammar, your pronunciation. They're just trying to, you know, be with you, and they're just having a great time. And so

the kids really do tend to get over some of their language nervousness, I think, their nervousness about speaking the language, about being perfect.

Lisa Wishman:

This is from the parents of a young man who was in Shanghai this summer for a summer program. Among the things they say is that "living with the Chinese host family proved to be everything one would hope for from a true immersion program. He developed a wonderfully close and warm relationship with his host family and indeed with several other families of other students on the program. His language fluency soared." How great is that. "He was able to skip one year of high school Chinese as a result of the summer program, going from Chinese 3 to Chinese 5." And that was in a space of six weeks, and that is not uncommon.

Lisa Choate:

I really think that one of the things the kids learn when they go on the program is that they see possibilities. And there's a whole world of possibilities out there.

Narrator:

?From the NSLI-Y perspective, helping the U.S. be more effectively engaged in the world is an overarching element of the program. By understanding different cultures and languages, American citizens can better identify with the diversity of people around the world in order to promote the welfare of the United States and the global community. That concept may seem irrelevant to many Americans. But the NSLI-Y experience offers real and tangible benefits to the participants as they think about their academic and professional futures.

Lisa Choate:

We have to define security really broadly, as well. That security, yes, it's national security on one hand. Nobody forgets about 9/11 or any of that. But on the other hand, it's also economic security. One thing that we always talk about is that English has been the language of business and so many things over the years and so it's very easy for us as Americans to sit back and just say, oh, we'll just learn English and you know, we'll do it in English. But anybody who knows a foreign language knows that once you go over and you actually speak the language and you work with the people, and you even go to the store to buy something using their language, suddenly you're a different person and you're perceived differently and you understand it differently than when you're the American who only knows English. You know, suddenly, you're one of them and they'll treat you differently and it puts you in a different place.

Lisa Wishman:

I've seen my own hometown internationalize unbelievably in the past 30 years. Globalization comes home. Realistically, "Joe American Citizen" who's eventually, hopefully going to part of the voting public, is going to be voting on tax issues. And your tax dollars are going to be used to support U.S. policies, domestic and abroad. And so knowing more about what's going on in Sudan, what's going on in Burma, what's going on, of course in Afghanistan and in Iraq, what's going on with Venezuela, I think one of the major sources of U.S. oil, let alone Saudi Arabia, or Iran. It's just kind of a part of how we live our lives even in small-town America. So you don't even have to leave to know that this stuff might be relevant and that if you had a better window into that world, you might be a better person for it, you might be a more knowledgeable person, and it might lead you down a path that you never thought about before.

Narrator:

NSLI-Y continues to develop the highest standards for implementing partners, local coordinators and program activities. The result is that students have more opportunities and a great experience. This also means that the program can expand and offer this unique opportunity to more students from across the United States. An opportunity that continues to pay dividends over the course of a student's life.

Lisa Wishman:

An individual now in university who was part of a 2008 Arabic language program in Morocco, he's been selected by the university to be an Arabic language Flagship Scholar and of course the Flagship program is the Department of Defense's NSLI cousin where they provide scholarships to students. So it says here he's going to have an opportunity as a Sophomore or a Junior to study at the University of Alexandria for a full year on a U.S. Government scholarship. It says here "without the Morocco program, I would not have the confidence to travel to Egypt for a full 12 months.

Lisa Choate:

So many of the parents write in and talk about how their child is so much more independent after they come back from the program. Sometimes parents don't think of independence as a good skill on the part of teenagers, you know, usually we want them to stay supervised or whatever, but what they're really talking about is that their child is so much more responsible. That they're making decisions because they had to do it for a while. I was calling a parent the other day just before Thanksgiving to tell them that their son had been sick and that he was doing better and I just wanted to check in with them to see that he was ok, and the father just kept saying, you know, this is such a great program and such a

good opportunity. We have never seen our son so happy. That's he's just really grown personally and professionally.

Narrator:

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